This Britain: 1 A contented nation?

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Here we try to go deeper than the ins and outs of current electoral polemic. Mark Abrams reports research which shows how relatively agreeable we seem to find life, even if 'unfairness' still rankles. On page 441, we give some rather more objective facts of British society. And on page 443, Jonathan Power sees a deep unhappiness behind it all.

Well before the dissolution of parliament, politicians from both major parties had concentrated their public oratory on three highly depressing topics—the near-disastrous economic condition of the country; the utter incompetence and perfidy of their rivals; and the determination of extremists of both left and right to disrupt, and even destroy, the familiar structure of British society. By January, there seemed to be abundant evidence to substantiate this despairing diagnosis of the state of the nation: the three-day working week, record balance of payments deficits, bitter industrial disputes, bursts of panic buying by consumers, and almost daily downward swoops of the *Financial Times* index of share prices. Since then the doom-laden rhetoric of the politicians has become even more insistant, and the economic facts have certainly not recorded any significant improvements. How has this two-fold assault affected the mood and outlook of the British people?

The evidence provided by sample surveys of "subjective social indicators"—ie, surveys in which the respondent indicates his satisfaction or dissatisfaction with various aspects of life (his job, his income, his leisure and so on)—suggest that, at least until shortly before the dissolution was announced, the speeches and the economic facts had done very little to disturb the high levels of satisfaction reported by the average adult early in 1971, when the first of such surveys was carried out in this country by the Survey Research Unit of the Social Science Research Council. Then, when asked to indicate on a 0 to 10 scale (0 = complete dissatisfaction, 10 = complete satisfaction) how satisfied or dissatisfied he was with his health, his job, his housing and his leisure, the sample's average scores for each of these domains came well up towards the top end of the scale. Even the lowest average score (for leisure) was 7.3. The highest (for health) was 8.0. Our most recent replication of this survey (interviewing carried out from the end of October 1973 to mid-January 1974), and again with a national probability sample of 1,000 members of the urban electorate, showed very much the same high levels of satisfaction in these domains (see table 1). In each of them, some-50 per cent of all respondents reported a satisfaction of 7, 8 or 9, and another roughly 30 per cent gave themselves the top rating of 10.

Again, as in the earlier survey, after respondents had dealt separately with several aspects of life (including the district they lived in, the quality of British democracy, their education, their general financial position), they were asked to use the same 0 to 10 scale to express a general view. They were asked: "All things considered, how satisfied or dissatisfied are you overall with your *life as a whole* these days?" The average score for the whole sample was 7.6. They went on to indicate that that was almost 10 per cent higher than where they would have put themselves on such a scale five years earlier; and looking forward, the average respondent estimated that, in five years' time, life would be sufficiently improved to reduce by almost 20 per cent the gap between his present level of satisfaction and the highest point (10) on the scale presented to him.

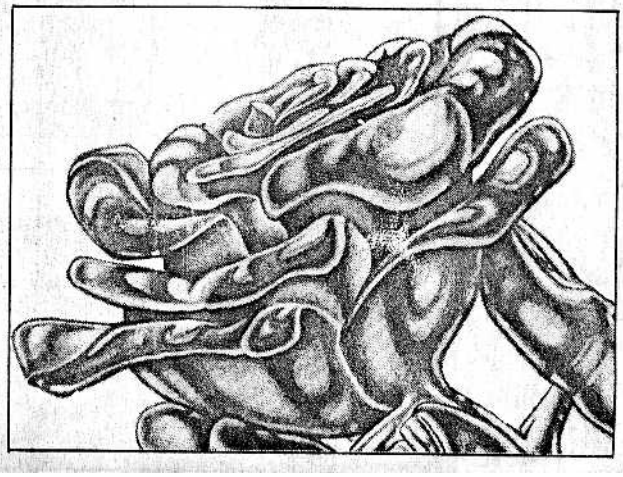
Table 1: Average ratings of satisfaction (0—10)

domain	1974	1971
job	8.3	7.8
housing	7.8	7.9
health	7.7	8.0
district	7.5	7.4
leisure	7.5	7.3
standard of living	7.4	73.
quality of democracy	6.7	7.4
education	6.7	7.2
financial situation	6.6	5.5

sample: 1,000

Other measures we employed in the interview yielded similar indications of widespread high contentment. When asked to use a 1 to 7 semantic differential scale to describe "my present life," a majority of respondents put ticks in the top two boxes (6 and 7) to portray their lives as interesting, enjoyable, full, hopeful and happy. And at another point in the interview, 80 per cent of respondents said that they agreed with the statement that "the average man is probably better off today than he ever was."

So far then, judged by the above measures, it would seem that the average adult in this country sees himself happily enjoying almost the best of



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all possible worlds. But the survey yielded other findings which indicate that, underlying these many levels of satisfaction, there are, roughly among half the population, other evaluations that indicate an entirely different assessment of the social order —an assessment heavily loaded with the feeling that, in present-day Britain, political power and economic goods are unfairly distributed.

In terms of average scores, the lowest levels of satisfaction were recorded when respondents gave ratings to the level of freedom and democracy in this country, and to their standard of living. (These latter ratings given both in absolute terms and in relation to what they thought other people enjoyed.)

Typical instances of scepticism about the prevailing quality of democracy came in the replies to such questions as: "How much social equality is there in Britain today? And how much do you think there ought to be?" Using the 0 to 10 scale, over half the sample gave replies to the question about today's state of affairs that ranged from 0 to 5. But over 80 per cent of all respondents felt that the degree of social equality that *ought* to prevail was best represented by ratings of 8, 9 or 10. Or again, the ratings of 60 per cent of the samples were in the 0 to 5 range when they were asked how much influence voters have on the way the country is governed. But nearly 90 per cent said that the degree of influence they ought to have would be best represented by scores of 8, 9 or 10.

The incidence of a sense of economic inequity emerged perhaps most clearly when respondents were asked to use the scale, firstly, to indicate where their present standard of living stood; and, secondly, what they thought they were entitled to (see table 2).

For the sample as a whole there was a substantial gap between the two. The average respondent feels that his entitlement is 20 per cent more than he actually has. This average, however, is an amalgam of two very different groups. Nearly half the respondents say they are already enjoying a standard of living equal to, or almost equal to, what they feel they are entitled to. These are for the most part, the rich, the very poor and the elderly. Those most likely to express views indicating that what they have (in material terms) falls well below that they are entitled to are unskilled manual workers, lower-level white collar workers, and those in the age group 18 to 29.

By asking each respondent to indicate what he thought were the standards of living enjoyed by members of various occupational groups (for example, directors, small shopkeepers, office clerks), we could infer the "reference groups" that he had in mind when assessing his own entitlement. The broad picture that emerges from this procedure is that of a pryamid built, for the most part, on modest one-step gradients.

For example, those old age pensioners who had a sense of being relatively deprived, compared to other people, usually attributed to small shopkeepers a standard of living which they felt they themselves should be enjoying. Unskilled and semi-skilled manual workers, who felt relatively deprived, aspired to the standard of living they thought was already enjoyed by office workers. Skilled manual workers felt they were entitled to the standards already possessed by doctors, lawyers and similar professional people. Office workers aimed at the comforts enjoyed by managers, and managers defined justice and fairness (for themselves) in terms of the standards already attained by company directors. In every section of the sample, over two thirds of respondents felt that a larger household income was necessary to enable them to cope with their money worries and to live in decent health and comfort. It was, too, the rich, the very poor and the elderly who had the most modest monetary aspirations (an extra £5 to £6 a week). Most other sections felt that something much nearer £8 or £9 was necessary to give them what they should have.

The precise significance of these demands for more income, and for standards of living enjoyed by others already higher up the socio-economic ladder, lost some of its precision when respondents were asked what they would do with the extra money, and what if anything they had had to go without because of their relative poverty. The answers to the latter question hardly formed a picture of widespread crisis. Half the total sample could not name anything they had had to forgo because of a drastic lack of money. Among the remainder, the most commonly mentioned sacrifices referred to holidays, running the family car, buying clothes and durable household goods—usually a colour television set.

If, then, one attempts to give a summary picture of the mood of the majority of the population under the impact of economic crisis and high-pitched party polemics, we are faced with a series of paradoxes. Most people are highly satisfied with most aspects of their lives; but at the same time they feel that they are entitled to more than they have. This desire for more is derived from their perception of how other people live, and is crystallised largely into a feeling that they need more money. For most of them there seem to be no pressing consumer needs that will at last be met by this additional money. But more money is seen as meeting another felt want—greater social equality.

These several (and not altogether consistent strands of feeling) were all underlined by the replies to one question, particularly. Respondents were asked to assume a complete freeze on all prices, and then choose between two possible income policies: "Your own family income to go up by £5 a week, while everyone else's goes up by £6 a week," *or*, "Everyone's income including your own, goes up by £4 a week." Over 80 per cent of the sample chose the lower figure for themselves rather than have £5 if this meant that other people might receive £6.

One final word. This present mood is not something that can be attributed directly to the present facts of British social life. As I have said, almost identical findings were obtained when a similar survey was carried out three years ago, and long before the present crisis was even contemplated. That was a time when people had been told that economic growth rates of 4, 5 and 6 per cent were now an assured part of the British economy. Attitudes seem remarkably independent of these economic facts.

Table 2: Present circumstances compared with entitlement

degree of relative deprivation	all	middle class	working class
	%	%	%
none: circumstances are better than entitlement	8	9	7
none: circumstances are equal to entitlement	25	41	17
some circumstances are one point below entitlement	13	24	8
some circumstances are two points below entitlement	40	16	52
some circumstaces are three points below entitlement	14	10	16
sample: 800			